

The Younger Set

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.
Author of "The Fighting Chance," Etc.

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"No, no, no! Wait," pressing an electric button. "Watson, Captain Selwyn's luggage is to be brought here immediately from the Holland! Immediately!" And to Selwyn: "Austin will not be at home before half past 6. Come up with me now and see your quarters, a perfectly charming place for you, with your own smoking room and dressing closet and bath. Wait, we'll take the elevator—as long as we have one."

Smilingly protesting, yet touched by the undisguised sincerity of his welcome, he suffered himself to be led into the elevator—a dainty white and rose rocco affair. His sister adjusted a tiny lever; the car moved smoothly upward and presently stopped, and they emerged upon a wide landing.

"Here," said Nina, throwing open a door. "Isn't this comfortable? Is there anything you don't fancy about it? If there is, tell me frankly."

"Little sister," he said, imprisoning both her hands, "it is a paradise, but I don't intend to come here and squat on my relatives, and I won't!"

"Philip! You are common!"

"Oh, I know you and Austin think you want me."

"Phil!"

"All right, dear. I'll—it's awfully generous of you—so I'll pay you a visit for a little while. You are very kind, Ninette." He sat partly turned from her, staring at the sunny window. Presently he slid his hand back along the bed covers until it touched and tightened over hers. And in silence she raised it to her lips.

They remained so for awhile, he still partly turned from her, his perplexed and narrowing gaze fixed on the window, she pressing his clenched hand to her lips, thoughtful and silent.

"Before Austin comes," he said at length, "let's get the thing over and buried as long as it will stay buried."

"Alix is here," she said gently. "Did you know it?"

He nodded.

"You know, of course, that she's married Jack Ruthven?"

He nodded again.

"Are you on leave, Phil, or have you really resigned?"

"Resigned."

"I knew it," she sighed.

He said: "As I did not defend the suit I couldn't remain in the service. There's too much said about us anyway—about us who are appointed from civil life. And then to have that happen!"

"Phil, do you still care for her?"

"I am sorry for her."

"After a painful silence his sister said, 'Could you tell me how it began, Phil?'"

"How it began? I don't know that either. When Bannard's command took the field I went with the scouts. Alix remained in Manila. Ruthven was there for Fane, Harmon & Co. That's how it began, I suppose, and it's a rotten climate for morals, and that's how it came."

"Only that?"

"We had had differences. It's been one misunderstanding after another. If you mean was I mixed up with another woman—no! She knew that."

"She was very young, Phil."

He nodded. "I don't blame her."

"Couldn't anything have been done?"

"If it could, neither she nor I did it or knew how to do it, I suppose. It went wrong from the beginning. It was founded on froth. She had been engaged to Harmon, and she threw him over for Boots Lansing. Then I came along. Boots behaved like a thoroughbred. That is all there is to it—inexperience, romance, trouble. She couldn't stand me, she couldn't stand the life, the climate, the inconveniences, the absence of what she was accustomed to. She was dead tired of it all. I can understand that. And we went under, that's all—fighting each other heart and soul to the end. Is she happy with Ruthven? I never knew him and never cared to. I suppose they go about in town among the yellow set. Do they?"

"Yes. I've met Alix once or twice. She was perfectly composed, formal, but unembarrassed. She has shifted her million somewhat. It began with the influx of Ruthven's friends from the 'yellow' section of the younger married set—the Orchills, Fanes, Minsters and Delmour-Carnes. By the way, I'm dipping into the younger set myself tonight on Eileen's account. I brought her out Thursday, and I'm giving a dinner for her tonight."

"Who's Eileen?" he asked.

"Eileen? Why, don't you—why, of course you don't know yet that I've taken Eileen for my own. Eileen is Molly Erroll's daughter, and the courts appointed Austin and me guardians for her and for her brother Gerald."

"Oh!"

"Now is it clear to you?"

"Yes," he said, thinking of the tragedy which had left the child so utterly alone in the world save for her brother and a distant kinship by marriage with the Gerald's.

For awhile he sat brooding, arms loosely folded, immersed once more in his own troubles.

"It seems a shame," he said, "that a family like ours, whose name has always spelled decency, should find themselves entangled in the very things their race has always hated and

managed to avoid. And through me too."

"But no disgrace touches you, dear," she said tremulously.

"I've been all over that, too," he said, with quiet bitterness. "You are partly right; nobody cares in this town. Even though I did not defend the suit, nobody cares. And there's no disgrace. I suppose, if nobody cares enough even to condone. Divorce is no longer noticed; it is a matter of ordinary occurrence, a matter of routine in some sets. Who cares except decent folk? And they only think it's a pity and wouldn't do it themselves. If Alix found that she cared for Ruthven I don't blame her. Laws and statutes can't govern such matters. If she found she no longer cared for me, I could not blame her. But two people mismatched have only one chance in this world—to live their tragedy through with dignity. That is absolutely all life holds for them; beyond that, outside of that dead line, treachery to self and race and civilization! That is my conclusion after a year's experience in hell." He rose and began to pace the floor, fingers worrying his mustache. "Law! Can a law which I do not accept let me loose to risk it all again with another woman?"

She said slowly, her hands folded in her lap: "It is well you've come to me at last. You've been turning round and round in that wheeled cage until you think you've made enormous progress, and you haven't. Dear, listen to me. What you honestly believe to be unselfish and high minded adherence to principle is nothing but the circling reasoning of a hurt mind—an intelligence still numbed from shock, a mental and physical life forced by sheer courage into mechanical routine. I tell you your life is not finished. It is not yet begun! You need new duties, new faces, new scenes, new problems. You shall have them. Dear, believe me, few men as young as you, as attractive, as human, as lovable, as affectionate as you, willfully ruin their lives because of a best pride which they mistake for conscience. You will understand that when you become convalescent. Now kiss me and tell me you're much obliged, for I hear Austin's voice on the stairs."

"Well, we've buried it now," breathed Selwyn. "You're all right, Nina, from your own standpoint, and I'm not going to make a stalking nuisance of myself. No fear, little sister. Hello—turning swiftly—"here's that preposterous husband of yours."

They exchanged a firm hand clasp. Austin Gerard, big, smooth shaven, humorously inclined toward the ruddy heaviness of successful middle age; Selwyn, lean, bronzed, erect and direct in all the powerful symmetry and perfect health of a man within sight of maturity.

"Nina's good enough to want me for a few days"—began Selwyn, but his big brother-in-law laughed scornfully: "A few days! We've got you now!"

And to his wife: "Nina, I suppose I'm due to lean over those infernal kids before I can have a minute with your brother. Are they in bed yet? All right, Phil. We'll be down in a minute. There's tea and things in the library. Make Eileen give you some."

When brooding. And as he stood there a sound at the door aroused him, and he turned to confront a young girl in hat, veil and furs, who was leisurely advancing toward him, stripping the gloves from a pair of very white hands.

"How do you do, Captain Selwyn?" she said. "I am Eileen Erroll, and I am commissioned to give you some tea. Nina and Austin are in the nursery telling bedtime stories and hearing assorted prayers. The children seem to be quite crazy about you. I congratulate you on your popularity."

"Did you see me in the nursery on all fours?" inquired Selwyn, recognizing her bronze red hair. Unfeigned laughter was his answer. He laughed, too, not very heartily.

"My first glimpse of our legendary nursery warrior was certainly astonishing," she said, looking around at him with frank malice. Then, quickly: "But you don't mind, do you?"

"Of course," he agreed with good grace: "no man is to pretend dignity here

you all see through me in a few moments."

She had given him his tea. Now she sat upright in her chair, smiling, disinterested, her hat casting a luminous shadow across her eyes; the fluffy furs, fallen from throat and shoulder, settled loosely around her waist.

Glancing up from her short reverie she encountered his curious gaze.

"Tonight is to be my first dinner dance, you know," she said. Faint tints of excitement stained her white skin; the vivid scarlet contrast of her mouth was almost startling. "On Thursday I was introduced," she explained, "and now I'm to have the gayest winter I ever dreamed of. And I'm going to leave you in a moment if Nina doesn't hurry and come. Do you mind?"

"Of course I mind," he protested amiably, "but I suppose you wish to devote several hours to dressing."

She nodded. "Such a dream of a gown! Nina's present! You'll see it. I hope Gerald will be here to see it. He promised. I hope you'll like my brother Gerald when you meet him. Now I must go."

Then, rising and partly turning to collect her furs:

"It's quite exciting to have you here. We will be good friends, won't we? And I think I had better stop my chatter and go, because my cunning little Alsatian maid is not very clever yet. Goodby."

She stretched out one of her amazingly white hands across the table, giving him a friendly leave taking and welcome all in one frank handshake, and left him standing there, the fresh contact still cool in his palm.

Nina came in presently to find him seated before the fire, one hand shading his eyes, and as he prepared to rise she rested both arms on his shoulders, forcing him into his chair again.

"So you have bewitched Eileen, too, have you?" she said tenderly. "Isn't she the sweetest little thing?"

"She's—as tall as I am," he said, blinking at the fire.

"She's only nineteen; pathetically unspoiled—a perfect dear. Men are going to rave over her and—not spoil her. Did you ever see such hair—that thick, ruddy, lustrous copper tint? And sometimes it's like gold afire! And a skin like snow and peaches! She's sound to the core. I've had her exercised and groomed and hardened and trained from the very beginning—every inch of her minutely cared for exactly like my own babies. I've done my

best," she concluded, with a satisfied sigh, and dropped into a chair beside her brother.

"I should say," observed Selwyn, "that she's equipped for the slaughter of man."

"Yes, but I am selecting the victim," replied his sister demurely. "Oh! Are you? Already?"

"Tentatively."

"Who?"

"Sudbury Gray, I think, with Scott Innis for an understudy, perhaps the Draymore man as alternate—I don't know; there's time."

"Plenty," he said vaguely, staring into the fire, where a log had collapsed into incandescent ashes.

She continued to talk about Eileen until she noticed that his mind was on other matters. His preoccupied stare enlightened her. She said nothing for awhile.

But he woke up when Austin came in and settled his big body in a chair.

"Drina, the little minx, called me back on some flimsy pretext," he said, relighting his cigar. "I forgot that time was going, and she was wily enough to keep me talking until Miss Palsely caught me at it and showed me out. I tell you," turning on Selwyn, "children are what make life worth while." He ceased abruptly at a gentle tap from his wife's foot, and Selwyn looked up.

Whether or not he divined the interference, he said very quietly: "I'd rather have had children than anything in the world. They're about the best there is in life. I agree with you, Austin."

His sister, watching him askance, was relieved to see his troubled face become serene, though she divined the effort.

"Kids are the best," he repeated, smiling at her. "Failing them, for second choice I've taken to the laboratory. Some day I'll invent something and astonish you, Nina."

"We'll fit you up a corking laboratory," began Austin cordially. "There is!"

"You're very good. Perhaps you'll all be civil enough to move out of the house if I need more room for bottles and retorts."

"Of course Phil must have his laboratory," insisted Nina. "There's loads of unused room in this big barn, only you don't mind being at the top of the house, do you, Phil?"

"Yes, I do. I want to be in the drawing room or somewhere so that you all may enjoy the odors and get the benefit of premature explosions. Oh, come now, Austin, if you think

(To be continued.)

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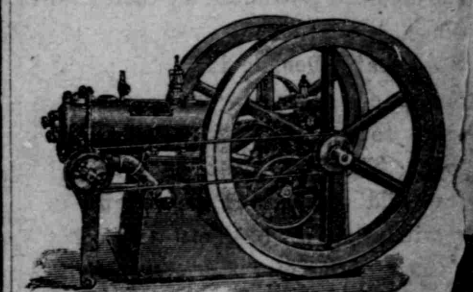
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